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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000523

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA

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SUBJECT: NABIH BERRI AUDITIONS FOR ROLE AS RECONCILIATOR

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Add Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri to the list of prominent Lebanese who seem genuinely shocked by Rafiq Hariri's murder a week ago. In a 2/21 meeting with the Ambassador that was free of his usual polemics and bombast, Berri vowed to play a moderating role on two fronts. First, he was working to calm tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities of Lebanon, as he believes that whoever killed Hariri was intentionally trying to ignite intra-Muslim strife. Second, he was trying to serve as an intermediary between the GOL and the opposition. He had met earlier with over 40 opposition MPs and agreed, despite his own reservations, to accept their proposal for a vote of confidence on the Karami government. But Berri expressed bewilderment about why the opposition would insist on a vote they would lose. He expressed frustration with what he interpreted as opposition foot-dragging vis-a-vis the electoral law, when elections are "the only way to solve this crisis." Berri did not launch into his usual attack when the Ambassador reminded him that the U.S. remains committed to seeing the full implementation of UNSCR 1559. He noted concern with his own safety. End summary.

BERRI WISTFUL ABOUT AL-QAEDA?

2. (C) Against the backdrop of thousands of protestors streaming through downtown Beirut (via multiple ad hoc security checkpoints) to gather near the site of Hariri's 2/14 murder, the Ambassador met Berri in the Parliament. Berri reiterated (with more sincerity than Captain Renault could express in the film "Casablanca") what he described as the "incredible shock" of Hariri's death exactly a week earlier. "Is it impossible that al-Qaeda did it?" he asked the Ambassador, almost hopefully. The Ambassador responded that we were not aware of any clear evidence at this point implicating anyone. This is why it is so important that the GOL cooperate fully with the UN investigatory team, in hopes of discovering the real culprits. Berri agreed, claiming to have worked personally to convince Minister of Interior Suleiman Franjeh of the need for full disclosure and cooperation with the UN team.

TRYING TO EASE SUNNI-SHIA TENSION

3. (C) Berri said that, while he also had no clue as to the culprit, "whoever did this wanted to turn Lebanon into Iraq -- Shia against Sunni, Sunni against Shia." The Ambassador noted that Hariri's murder seemed to bring the Sunnis, Druse and Christians together in solidarity. He asked how serious were the problems between the Sunni and Shia communities. Grimacing, Berri did not answer directly but said that he was personally going out of his way to calm tensions. That, he said, explained the prominent "master-of-ceremonies" role he assumed at Hariri's funeral. Berri also noted that, at the beginning of all of the Ashura commemorations he had attended, he had started out with condolences to the Hariri family and a recitation of the Qur'an in memory of Hariri.

He had made sure that prominent Shia MPs and clerics paid condolences on the Hariris, both in Beirut and in Sidon. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan has adopted the same approach, Berri said: The Shia need to see their leaders honoring Hariri's memory, and the Sunnis need to see the Shia showing proper respect. Berri expressed cautious optimism that, "without another incident," the tensions would soon ease. (Newspapers in Beirut today were filled with photographs of Ashura marchers carrying placards bearing Hariri's portrait alongside Nasrallah's.)

MODERATING THE LOYALISTS

14. (C) Berri said that he was trying to play a similar moderating role in promoting dialogue between the GOL and the opposition, which so far has refused to meet with government ministers. The second "loyalist" conference, held at the Speaker's official residence in 'Ain al-Tina in West Beirut on 2/20, was intentionally moderate in tone, he said, "at my request." He said that some members argued for "strong measures" against opposition demonstrations today, but others shouted down the confrontational approach. In the end, the loyalists said in their communique their desire for "dialogue" with the opposition, words for which Berri claimed credit. Shaking his head, Berri said that "I know I am the only one" capable of bridging the divide between the loyalist and opposition camps.

MEETING WITH THE OPPOSITION

15. (C) In that regard, Berri said that, earlier on 2/21, he had taken the initiative to meet with over 40 Members of Parliament from all the key opposition factions. While Druse Leader Walid Jumblatt was not there in person out of concern for his own security, Jumblatt sent others to represent him. Berri expressed some frustration that the "opposition doesn't know what it wants." Do they want a Syrian withdrawal? Do they want the government to resign? Do they want to concentrate on free and fair elections? Do they want to see an investigation into Hariris' death? The Ambassador suggested that perhaps they want all of those steps.

OPPOSITION REBUFFS BERRI'S HOPE FOR WORK ON ELECTION LAW

16. (C) Berri said that he tried to persuade the opposition into moving quickly to debate and pass an electoral law. Elections, in Berri's view, are essential as "the only way to solve this crisis." But the opposition claimed it would be "shameful" (Berri used the Arabic word 'aib) to have committee sessions so soon after Hariri's death. "Why?" Berri asked rhetorically. "Wouldn't it honor Hariri to pass a good electoral law? Wasn't Hariri worried about the election law?" Berri said that he had tried to reach out his hand to the opposition by telling them that, if they wanted, he would now readily abandon his previous hesitations and wholeheartedly embrace the qada' small districting in the current law. "I asked Nayla Mouawad and Nassib Lahoud: 'Have you ever heard me before say that I am for the qada'? I want to show you I want to work with you."

BERRI CONCEDES TO HOLD VOTE OF CONFIDENCE ON CABINET

17. (C) With the opposition refusing to engage on the election law for now, Berri said that he eventually accepted their insistence on holding a vote of confidence on the Karami government. The Speaker said that he would schedule that vote on Monday. The opposition will lose the vote, he said, "so what's the point?" The Ambassador noted that some "loyalist" MPs, sensing the mood on the street, might in fact vote against the confidence. "They still won't win," Berri said, "and we will have lost a week when we should have been working on the election law."

CALLING FOR USING
TAIF "CONSENSUS"

18. (C) The Ambassador reminded Berri that, besides support for a credible investigation into Hariri's murder and free and fair elections, the United States was also insisting on full implementation of UNSCR 1559. As the demonstrators outside Berri's office were shouting, it is time for Syrian troops to leave Lebanon. Berri did not launch into his usual defense of Syria being the only chance for Lebanon to avoid its destabilizing demons. "I support Taif," Berri responded. "We have a consensus on Taif. We must work from consensus, especially now."

19. (C) In closing, Berri asked the Ambassador about the Embassy's security precautions. The Ambassador responded that we are constantly monitoring the situation and adjusting our procedures and our moves accordingly. Berri nodded, saying that he no longer traveled in his well-known Parliamentary Speaker car. Now, he said, he has several armored cars with "regular" license plates. He is switching among these cars, although the Parliamentary Speaker car still moves along the streets without him.

COMMENT

10. (C) Having come directly from his meeting with the opposition MPs to his meeting with the Ambassador, Berri was subdued. With the opposition refusing to deal either with President Lahoud or Prime Minister Karami, Berri knows that his role is pivotal. We do not believe that the opposition has any love for Berri, either, given his fealty to Syria. But opposition politicians are still at this point trying to work within the existing system by showing respect for the Office of the Speaker. Berri seems to be taking his moderating role seriously, especially as he did not dismiss out of hand the opposition call for a vote of confidence. (For the sake of moving beyond an anti-Syrian crisis that could potentially endanger his own grip on power, Berri probably would have agreed to just about anything on the election law, too. But we suspect that the opposition is divided internally on what is best for legislative elections.)

11. (C) The opposition MPs are starting from a position of unusual strength. As the Ambassador and Berri met, outside the Parliament, stretching from the site of Hariri's murder to Hariri's grave, thousands of protestors waving the Lebanese flag under crystal clear blue skies were chanting for Syria to leave Lebanon. At the time of this cable drafting, the GOL was, like Berri, trying to project a moderating influence and not fall into a trap of provoking the crowds. All traffic to the city center was stopped at security checkpoints, but no one was being stopped from joining the demonstrations. It is far from clear how sustainable these demonstrations will be in the days to come, or whether the demonstrators agree with the opposition MPs that it is best to try to work through the Speaker's Office to find areas of common ground. We expect that many of the demonstrators are, in fact, more radical than most of the MPs said to represent them.

FELTMAN